

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SPOKEN AND WRITTEN SHETLAND DIALECT: A HISTORIAN'S VIEW

Brian Smith

I am having the temerity to write about the Shetland dialect and its history because I believe that we can't altogether leave the subject to linguists. I say so because we have an example of the havoc that a linguist can play with the subject. I'm speaking about Laurits Rendboe's prolific work on Shetland Norn and the modern Shetland dialect. Rendboe isn't typical, but I'm afraid that some of his predilections and obsessions, and in particular the way that he deploys what he imagines is history, are paralleled in work by other linguists, even that of the revered Jakob Jakobsen.

For Rendboe, and Jakobsen, the death of Norn was tragic, the result of brutal oppression by Scotsmen. That oppression, involving the manipulation of weights and measures by Scottish incomers, especially between the 1560s and 1611, turned Shetland society 'topsy-turvy', in Jakobsen's phrase (Jakobsen 1928-32: xiv-xv). By some unexplained development these oppressions persuaded Shetlanders that, and I quote Jakobsen again, it was 'genteel to adopt Scottish words and modes of expression' (Jakobsen 1928-32: xvi). That was the first nail in Norn's coffin, exacerbated much later by the 'steamer service and penny papers' (cited in Grønneberg 1981: 18). By the time that Jakobsen arrived here, in 1893, there were only what the Nornophiles regard as the 'pitiful remains' of a great language.

According to Rendboe, in a new twist to the story, Norn actually survived, under the hated but mimicked new regime, for a very long time. It lingered here far longer than in Orkney, presumably because Orkney was much nearer the continent of Scotland. People had told Jakobsen that there were Norn-speakers in Foula as late as the second half of the nineteenth century, but Jakobsen was sceptical. That so-called Norn, he said, 'can hardly have been of much account'. It simply 'contained a greater sprinkling of Norn words which the younger people did not understand' (Jakobsen 1928-32: xix). Jakobsen was one of the world's great *pessimists*: he was interested in the dead language, not the living one which had replaced it. He was so pessimistic that he predicted that Shetland's Norn vocabulary would disappear 'in the near future' (Jakobsen 1928-32: xx).

Rendboe makes much of Jakobsen's late-19th century Norn-speakers, but he doesn't quote Jakobsen's words of caution. He implies that there were secret Norn-speakers in the late eighteenth and even the nineteenth century, people who displayed great cunning in hiding their language from landlords and ministers (Rendboe 1984; 1985a). These linguistic rebels spoke 'pure'

Norn, uncontaminated by Scots. But all good things come to an end. Even Rendboe has to admit that there's no Norn around today. But he imagines that we're still dreaming about it, and that it is lurking around in our psyche.

As I said, we can't leave the history of our language to the linguists. I'm going to argue that Jakobsen and Rendboe — especially Rendboe — got it wrong. I suggest that Norn died for very complex reasons, and that the modern Shetland dialect established itself at a rather earlier date than the linguists sometimes imagine. I'll argue that much the same process, at much the same speed, happened in Orkney. Finally, I believe that the modern Shetland dialect is far more flexible, and its speakers and writers far more sophisticated, than the Nornophiles imagine.

The life and death of Norn

Before we understand the modern Shetland dialect we have to get Norn out of the way. I have rather a lot to say about that.

One of the most cherished old chestnuts about Shetland Norn is a belief that Shetlanders were writing documents in a Norse language until the first decade of the seventeenth century. The pundits contrast this remarkable situation with that in Orkney, where Scots documents are said to appear much earlier, and where Norse documents undoubtedly disappear at an early date. The Shetland antiquary Gilbert Goudie hunted down many of these Norse documents, 'waifs and strays' as he affectionately called them, and wrote a long and enormously influential article about them (Goudie 1904: 78-131).

There are several points to make about Goudie's documents. First, almost all of them were written in Norway. As a result they were naturally written in Norwegian, or rather in Danish. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Shetland still had strong commercial links with Norway, and strong landowning connexions, links which Orkney had lost many years previously (Smith 1990: 25-37). It was inevitable that Shetlanders and Norwegians, from time to time, would write down details of their mutual transactions. However, these documents tell us little or nothing about the language spoken in Shetland at the time. Only one of them can be said with certainty to have been written in Shetland, by Shetlanders. It was written in 1545.

Having said that, I have little doubt — although there's precious little information on the subject — that Shetlanders of the sixteenth century spoke a Norse language. However, I have little doubt either that, especially during the second half of the century, they were proficient in other languages as well. The most extraordinary feature of the documentary record of Shetland history, from the moment when we have lots of documents, is the fact that no-one ever refers to language *problems*. We only need to contrast that with the situation in Gaelic Scotland to smell a rat immediately. The first substantial record of public affairs in Shetland, the complaint against Laurence Bruce of

Cultmalindie in February 1577, is a fine example of mutual communication between Shetlanders, who are said to have spoken ‘all in ane voice’, and the men who wrote the Shetlanders’ complaints down. Seven hundred male Shetlanders attended an assembly at Tingwall where two visiting Scots commissioners, Messrs Mudy and Henderson, transcribed their intricate grievances (Balfour 1859: 15-92). Those of us who have read that lengthy record not once but a hundred times marvel at how thoroughly Mudy and Henderson did their job, without any apparent howlers.

Similarly, there is no indication that the Shetlanders had had any difficulty in communicating with the main object of their complaint, Laurence Bruce of Cultmalindie, or with his Scots creatures — at least at the level of language. Furthermore, in one passage the Shetlanders describe how they overheard some German merchants discussing complex arrangements concerning commercial matters, and again they seem to have had no difficulty in understanding them (Balfour 1859: 41). I have a strong impression, from looking at these and other sources, that many late sixteenth century Shetlanders were good at languages.

To understand that proficiency we don’t need to investigate the Shetlanders’ genes, but their society. Shetland in the late sixteenth century had emerged in good shape from the long late medieval depression. Her population was rising, and she was participating in a lively trade with merchants from Germany, Scotland, Holland and England. Until 1611 there was a vigorous local government here which, among many other things, kept the visiting merchants in check. This society wasn’t, as Jakobsen and others have put it, ‘topsy-turvy’, whatever that means. It was a healthy and relatively prosperous society, whose inhabitants, as far as we can tell, were noted for linguistic virtuosity.

The situation concerning the Scots language is relatively complex, but not impossible to reconstruct. Scots was of course the language of churchmen. As Sir Thomas Craig wrote about 1605, ‘in the Orkneys and Shetland, where in the course of [the 16th] century nothing but Norse was spoken, the ministers of God’s word now use English in church and are well enough understood’ (Terry 1909: 288-9). Once again there’s no evidence of language problems. Scots was also the language of the law courts, but, as readers of Earl Patrick’s court book of 1602-4 will know (Donaldson 1954), the officials of that court frequently used and were perfectly familiar with the lexicon of Shetland institutions. In fact those officials were often Shetlanders.

And it would be wrong to argue that Scots who set up shop in Shetland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were themselves monoglot. In 1624, for instance, the bishop of Orkney visited Shetland to adjudicate in a dispute between the Neven and Mouat families. One morning John Neven, brother of one of the main protagonists in the case, arrived to speak with Ninian Neven, and, to the bishop’s annoyance, ‘conferit with him secreitlie in ane unknowen language’ (*Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, xiv:

760). We don't know what language Neven was speaking: it may have been Norn, or, perhaps more likely, German, or even Dutch. There's evidence from a later source that Ninian Neven could speak Dutch. The point is that the ruling class in Shetland was just as capable as the natives of linguistic ingenuity.

Of course, this situation didn't remain stable. During the seventeenth century Shetland, like societies throughout Europe, became crisis-ridden. I have no space to discuss the details here, but, in a nutshell, the local government collapsed after the departure of Earl Patrick, and, for a variety of reasons, the Shetlanders' contacts with German, Dutch and Norwegian merchants and fishermen, especially the Norwegians, diminished. These events naturally had an effect on the Shetlanders' proficiency with languages, although the new town of Lerwick remained a keyhole, so to speak, where foreign influences could enter.

By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century the situation is crystal clear. Norn was still alive, probably very much alive in some areas, but most of the commentators adopt a slightly negative tone about its prospects. One cleric says that the Shetlanders 'speak among themselves a corrupt Nords tongue (called Norn) *but not so much now as formerly*' (Bruce 1908: 4). Robert Sibbald, writing in the early eighteenth century, and apparently basing his remarks on information from Shetland friends, says that 'many of them speak a Norse Tongue, corrupted (they call Norn) amongst themselves, *which is now much worn out*' (Sibbald 1845: 15-16). (My italics.) John Brand, visiting Shetland in 1700, turns the equation the other way round: 'English is the Common Language among them, yet many of the People speak Norse or corrupt Danish, especially such as live in the more Northern Isles, yea so ordinary is it in some places, that it is the first Language their Children speak' (Brand 1701: 69).

Nearly everybody (except Rendboe) agrees that Norn disappeared during the eighteenth century, but there is disagreement about the tempo of that disappearance. Once again we find little or no reference to difficulties of communication between different social classes in the islands — not surprisingly, because we didn't find such references a century and a half earlier. According to Thomas Gifford, writing about 1733, many Shetlanders still spoke Norn among themselves, but everyone, he said, spoke English by that time, 'which they pronounce with a very good accent' (Gifford 1976: 31-2). The only hint of a problem appears not in Shetland but in Orkney, in 1725, when the minister of the remote parish of Sandwick said that his flock needed a charity school, because, as he put it, 'the old broken Danish language is used among many of the people, which occasions ignorance in the place' (Campbell 1953: 175). But that minister wasn't, strictly speaking, complaining about difficulties in communication; his main concern was the desirability of genteel speech. As the century progressed more schools were established throughout the islands; significantly, there are no references at all to language

problems in Shetland among the minutes of the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge.

Once again we have to keep in mind the social and economic background to these accounts. The main difference between seventeenth and eighteenth century Shetland was the fact that, in the later period, local merchant-lairds controlled commerce with the continent. In the earlier period German merchants had had semi-permanent bases in many parts of the islands, Dutch fishermen had fraternised with Shetlanders, and ordinary Shetlanders had sailed to Norway to trade in wood. As the Earl of Rothes had written in the 1660s, as a result of 'the constant uninterrupted trade they have ever had with the Hollander, Hamburger, Luebecker and Bremeners ... there is none in that island of six or seven years of age, but they can speak Hollands or Norse' (Ball 1965: 6-7). That situation had changed fundamentally by 1750. Eighteenth century Shetlanders had fewer opportunities to hear or practise foreign languages than their grandfathers. On the other hand, many of them now had the opportunity to hear English lessons at school. James Mackenzie, writing in Orkney in 1750, said that the S.P.C.K. schools had been the death of Norn (Mackenzie 1836: 12); I see no reason to doubt that the same thing happened in Shetland, at exactly the same time.

Our best source of information about the eighteenth century is the journal of George Low, a young minister from Orkney who visited Shetland in 1774. Low only mentions Norn in the section of his journal dealing with Foula. Jakobsen thought that Low's account proved that Norn was still a 'living language' in Foula at that late date (Jakobsen 1928-32: xvii). Low's account actually proves the opposite. Low said that 'there are some who know a few words of Norn' in the island, and that 'nothing remains but a few names of things and two or three remnants of songs which one old man can repeat, and that but indistinctly' (Low 1879: 104ff.). Low's most knowledgeable informant recited a Norn ballad to him, but couldn't translate it. Low didn't describe a living language; he described a dead one.

There's an interesting parallel account from Orkney. Walter Scott, in a note to *The Pirate*, tells us about a clergyman in North Ronaldsay who had recited Thomas Gray's 'The fatal sisters' to an island audience, presumably in the early 1770s, shortly after Gray's collected *Poems* appeared. The islanders interrupted him to say that they knew the poem well in Norse, and had often sung it to him. This story deserves more attention than it has received. Gray had translated 'The fatal sisters' not from Norse but from a Latin text of the poem. The people of North Ronaldsay, unlike Low's informant in Foula, must have been very alive to the meaning of their Norse original if they could immediately recognise what was strictly speaking a paraphrase of it. It's a great pity that Low didn't turn his attention to North Ronaldsay as well as Foula.

Of course, I don't know how 'pure' Shetland Norn was in its last lustre, or precisely how it co-existed with or broke down in the face of Scots. No-

one knows. Rendboe lays great stress on the famous rhyme, recorded by Jakobsen, where the author praises or mercilessly scolds — you take your choice — a Shetlander who has been to Caithness and learned to speak Scots. If I were a philologist I wouldn't lay a lot of stress on that verse: Jakobsen doesn't explain where he got it. He merely says that it is 'said' to come from Unst, and that it is 'said' to date from the eighteenth century. Not very satisfactory. And if I were Laurits Rendboe I wouldn't cite it at all. As Michael Barnes has hinted, it suggests that, contrary to Rendboe's whole argument, Norn was becoming contaminated by Scots during its last days (Barnes 1984: 41).

Summing up the situation about Norn, then, I look at the problem like this. Norn remained a living language until the crisis years of the late seventeenth century, although many people who spoke it could cope with Scots and other languages as well. By the early eighteenth century, however, Norn was on the way out: not because of oppression, but because the Shetlanders, especially younger Shetlanders, chose not to speak it. They turned their attention elsewhere. It's as simple as that. I now turn to the language they chose to speak, and still speak.

Early Shetland dialect texts

Our earliest Shetland dialect text was published, or at least printed, in 1817. It has a strange history. It was the work of Archibald Barclay, who was then about 30. Barclay was a son of an eighteenth century minister of Unst, and eventually became secretary to the Hudson's Bay Company. He was exactly the kind of person who, according to Laurits Rendboe, would have paid no attention to and had no knowledge of what ordinary Shetlanders were saying.

Around 1816 Barclay wrote a humorous letter in Shetland dialect to his friend John Sands in Liverpool. Sands was tickled, and passed a copy to a third Shetlander, Thomas Irvine of Midbrake in North Yell. Irvine was working at a Deaf and Dumb School in Bermondsey in London, and he thought it would be a good wheeze to print a dozen copies of the piece on the school printing press, for distribution to friends (Shetland Archives: D.16/294/3).

A glance at Barclay's letter reveals that he was a very accomplished Shetland dialect speaker. There are several things to say about this enormously interesting production. First, if we pass over the wild spelling and the extremely rich vocabulary, a modern Shetlander would be able to stumble through it without much difficulty. It's a piece of slapstick, built around the adventures and misfortunes of about a dozen no doubt well-known inhabitants of Unst.

Barclay's production became a set-piece in nineteenth century expositions of the Shetland dialect. In 1836 an anonymous contributor from Morpeth published it in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, with a not too-inaccurate

translation. 'I have procured from the Shetland islands', he wrote, 'a specimen of the language still spoken among the common people there. ... The narrative, it is plain, has been contrived to embody in it as many words and phrases peculiar to the vulgar language of the district as its compass would admit of.' The tone of this description is interesting. The anonymous expositor regards Barclay's piece as slightly amusing — as indeed it was meant to be. There's a faint implication that the 'vulgar language of the district' was a debased language. In 1861 W.R. Duncan published a rather better-spelled but incomplete version of Barclay's piece in the second edition of his *Zetland Directory and Guide*. In a footnote he wrote: 'the common language is fast yielding to a purer English, but well educated men are still much amused at the conversation of the labouring classes in the country'.

These commentators weren't prepared to take the Shetland dialect seriously. Ironically, the tone they adopt is similar to that adopted by the Norn fanatics, who regard the dialect as the 'pitiful remains' of a great language. Duncan and Co. regarded it as a pitiful shadow of the genteel *English* language. On the other hand, there were those who took it more seriously, or at least took it at face value. Samuel Hibbert, who visited Shetland in 1818, published what he calls 'a tolerable specimen of the modern Shetland dialect', a straightforward account of a bad day at the fishing narrated, presumably to Hibbert himself, by a fisherman at Fedeland in Northmavine (Hibbert 1822: 512-13). Almost simultaneously the Methodist missionaries who had started coming to Shetland after the Napoleonic wars began to take an interest in the way their Shetland flocks spoke. One of them, Sammy Dunn, wrote to Adam Clarke in 1822: 'Would you wish a glossary of Shetland words, which I am picking up? I have already about four hundred' (Clarke 1837: 154).

There were few local scholars of the language spoken in Shetland. Part of the reason for that was the lack of any urban culture in the islands: there were few libraries or schools worth the name, and intellectuals were few and far between. There were three exceptions: William Alexander Grant, Arthur Laurenson and Robert Sinclair, all Lerwick merchants in the mid-nineteenth century. Grant's career was promising. In his thirties he began a Shetland dictionary, with shrewd etymologies derived from Scandinavian dictionaries. Unfortunately he had a strange private life. In the early 1860s he struck up a disastrous love-hate relationship with a visiting Roman Catholic spy from Russia, and began to smear tar over the houses and offices of local dignitaries. As a result he had to leave Shetland suddenly. What remains of his work is in archives in Bilbao and Bergen, and much of it was posthumously incorporated in Thomas Edmondston's Shetland dialect dictionary of 1866 (Smith 1987).

Arthur Laurenson was a different kind of scholar. Withdrawn and ascetic, he read widely in Old Norse literature, and took an interest in the Shetland dialect. His little article 'Om sproget paa Shetlandsøerne' is an

interesting early treatment of the subject (Laurenson 1860). But Laurenson agonised over his written work, and as a result only left fragments.

The third scholar, Robert Sinclair, a native of Aithsting, was in many ways the most accomplished; but, like Laurenson, he suffered from the Shetland complaint of not committing things to print. His only work is an enormous novel, with large sections in Shetland dialect, published serially in the *Shetland Times* in 1879. He emigrated to New Zealand shortly afterwards.

In the absence of linguistic work, or even detailed accounts of everyday speech, it's difficult to assess the Shetland dialect of this period on its own terms. I suspect, given what we do know, that Shetlanders hadn't lost the linguistic virtuosity of their ancestors; in other words, that they weren't speaking a debased version of either Norm or English. Jakobsen and others have painted a picture of a language under threat from schools and modern civilization. By the nature of things it's not usually feasible to find out precisely what was happening in schools, other than through the clipped written remarks of teachers or inspectors. Certainly we know that in late nineteenth century France there was a national war against the use of dialect in schools, following revelations in 1863 that a quarter of the country's population couldn't speak French (Weber 1979: 67ff.).

Fortunately we can get a glimpse of what was happening in at least one school in Shetland, in the early 1870s, thanks to Laurence Williamson, a scholar in the island of Yell. Williamson was a compulsive transcriber of discussions, and around 1875 he filled up the space at the end of a page of notes by recording a scene that had taken place in the classroom at East Yell, his old school (Shetland Archives: D.7/43/1). Williamson had a prodigious memory, and we can be fairly sure that his account is accurate. The interesting thing about it is the way that both the teacher, the larger than life local character Andrew Dishington Mathewson, and his pupils, switch from English to Shetland dialect in an extremely sophisticated way.

Here's a brief extract, with responses by the pupils in italics. 'William Johnson. *Absent*. He'll be firing the telegraph cups again. They say there are some of the stays missing. I saw een awa atween da deks o Gossabrough and Otterswick - I saw een hingin dirlin. Lowrie Henry Robertson. *Absent*. He's been all winter. *He's fishing pluckers.*' And so on.

Now, I don't want to suggest that dialogue like this was typical in Victorian schools in Shetland. A.D. Mathewson was an unusual man. But in these exchanges I can recognise features of the flexibility of contemporary Shetland dialect. Shetlanders of the seventeenth century were multilingual in Norm, Scots and Dutch; I can well imagine that their descendants in the nineteenth century were equally inventive in switching between dialect and standard English. As an aside I should mention that many Lerwegians of the 1860s could speak fluent Dutch (Laurenson 1860: 193). I don't suggest for a moment that this kind of bilingualism is a special Shetland characteristic; it's typical of many lively communities. To take an example from farther afield:

D.H. Lawrence's father, whose Nottinghamshire dialect is portrayed in *Sons and Lovers*, was capable of speaking the most flawless King's English, sometimes, when he wanted to annoy his son, with a ludicrously affected accent (Worthen 1991: 62).

As a result I believe we should look rather differently at Jakob Jakobsen's visit to Shetland in the early 1890s. We usually see his arrival as the advent of a saviour, poised to rescue our language from extinction. There's no doubt, of course, that Jakobsen's visit was important, not merely because of his prodigious collection of words, but because he encouraged people, especially young people, to take an interest in the history of their language and place-names. As one Shetlander said in 1894, 'Mr Jakobsen's visit ... must have an interest even for the most ignorant Shetlanders. How he makes our places alive with intelligence!' (Anderson 1894). On the other hand, there had been an efflorescence of Shetland dialect writing here before Jakobsen arrived. In the mid-eighties Haldane Burgess, L.J. Nicolson and Basil Ramsay Anderson had begun to feature in the local press as fine dialect poets, following the examples of James Stout Angus and George Stewart, who inaugurated modern Shetland dialect writing in 1879. Burgess and Nicolson were especially inventive: Nicolson wrote atheist verse, and Burgess explored radical and eventually socialist ideas in the dialect. They were irreverent. Both Nicolson and Burgess wrote hilarious pastiches of Tennyson's gruesome jubilee ode of 1887, Nicolson from a socialist and Burgess from a rumbustiously anti-monarchist point of view. This was the period when Lerwick began to come alive as a centre of Shetland's intellectual life: precisely the moment when Jakobsen was striding around in the outer isles.

Jakobsen was friendly with some of the Shetland dialect writers, especially Burgess, but there isn't much evidence that he took an interest in what they were trying to do. This is partly because he was a linguist through and through, and had little or no time for anything else (except singing Scandinavian songs). Jakobsen's obsession with Shetland's Norm and alleged Celtic vocabulary, to the complete exclusion of Scots, made his work excessively antiquarian, as Gunnel Melchers has pointed out. And there's also a certain philistinism in Jakobsen's remark, in the introduction to his dictionary (Jakobsen 1928-32: xx), that:

compulsory education ... in which the use of English is impressed upon the children, and the use of such words and phrases as are peculiar to the Shetland dialect is not permitted in the schools, will involve, in the near future, the Anglicising of practically the whole speech.

This statement, as well as being grossly pessimistic, was, as I said before, an entirely inaccurate prediction. Jakobsen could only make such a statement because he believed that Shetlanders were passive *victims* of various kinds of linguistic oppression. Subconsciously he must have regarded their language,

and hence their literature, as poverty-stricken. In that sense Jakobsen's visit and influence was not liberating at all.

The modern Shetland dialect

In the third and final part of this paper I want to look at the Shetland dialect from the point of view of the 1990s. Today we have problems and opportunities. There's no doubt that Shetlanders have forgotten or never encountered many thousands of the words recorded in Jakobsen's dictionary, although I sometimes get a surprise when I hear a gem. This is hardly surprising. The late 19th century economy and society of Shetland has disappeared forever, and as a result large parts of its lexicon have gone into oblivion.

As I said at the outset, Laurits Rendboe imagines that we still dream about Norn and the society where it flourished. I want to illustrate Rendboe's psychodrama of Shetland history and culture by looking at what he says about three well-known Shetland dialect poems.

First, T.A. Robertson's 'A Skyinbow a Tammie's'. Based thematically and metrically on Browning's poem of 1855, 'A tocatta of Galuppi's', Robertson's poem is a meditation on the Shetland dialect. It contains the sweet lines: 'Trowe wir minds wir ain auld language/Still keeps rinnin laek a tön'. 'Wir ain auld language' is of course the Shetland dialect, of which Tammy Alex Robertson was one of the greatest modern proponents. However, Rendboe has a different interpretation. "'Our own old language",' he tells us, 'is not Mod[ern] Sh[etlandic], which is a comparatively recent formation, being Low Scots with a peculiar Shetland pronunciation, and many old Shetland words from Norn, the language which the poet has in mind, the original language of Shetland' (Rendboe 1985b: 46) In other words, the language running through T.A. Robertson's mind like a tune was a language he couldn't speak, and which no Shetlander has been able to speak since the eighteenth century: a language without written texts which is only known to us by name and reputation.

My second example of Rendboe's critical method is his treatment of James Stout Angus's 'Lad at wis taen in voar', a delicate poem narrated by a woman whose lover has been captured by the press gang. Other, more affluent men are pursuing her, but she vows never to forget her first love. Rendboe's exposition is as follows: 'When the flower of Shetland's male youth was taken away [by the press gang], the field was open for "the incomers" to get at the now defenceless weaker sex, to try to "Scotticize" Shetland in a very permanent way' (Rendboe 1985a: 19).

Finally, Haldane Burgess's epic 'Skranna', about a Shetlander, Rasmie, who is tempted by the devil: a poem about faith and ideals versus material temptations. The key word in the poem is 'feft'. 'Rasmie is "feft"', says the hero to the Devil — committed to Christianity — and the Devil disappears. But for Rendboe, unlike Rasmie and all other commentators, 'feft' refers to

the constitutional arrangements between Denmark and Scotland concerning Shetland of 1469. 'Being the Old Norse Shetlander', he explains, '... whose land has only been temporarily impignorated, [Rasmie] ... cannot give in to such sweet talk' (Rendboe 1985a: 21-2)

What I find distressing about these contributions is their notion that Shetlanders are obsessed with narrow and mythical historical matters. The three poems I've mentioned aren't works of genius, but they make a stab at discussing important modern themes. Those themes aren't parochial, or pathological, like the attitudes described in Rendboe's work. Rendboe isn't prepared to treat Shetland poems as poems; for him they are sociology.

The period between Burgess's best work, produced in the 1890s, and the 1940s, when the poets associated with the *New Shetlander* magazine began to write, was bleak in Shetland, both from an economic and a cultural point of view. Shetlanders of that era certainly weren't thinking about Norn. An expatriate Shetland scholar, writing in the 1940s, guessed that only one Shetlander by then was knowledgeable enough to explain Shetland place-names from their Old Norse roots — and that Shetlander, William Ratter, had just died (Stewart 1948: 4). However, the appearance of the *New Shetlander* in 1947 inaugurated major change. The new developments weren't in the field of scholarship, but in letters, and in particular Shetland dialect verse. These events are truly contemporary: many of the protagonists are still with us.

I want to take a closer look at one of the *New Shetlander* poets: Billy Tait, who died in 1992. Billy Tait wasn't obsessed by Norn, but as a teacher in Lerwick he became deeply interested in Jakobsen's dictionary as a quarry for poetic words. (The school jotter where he transcribed his discoveries is now in the Shetland Archives.) Shetlanders, Billy wrote in the fourth *New Shetlander*, should follow Hugh MacDiarmid and Burns:

not in the sense of imitating an alien though allied tradition, but in constructing an eclectic literary language, based on, but not bounded by the speech of the people. They must be afraid neither of experimenting, nor of judicious borrowing, but aware of the underlying genius of the language. ... They must look on it as their duty to restore to general currency by imaginative usage many of the fine old words now known only by a few.

'The underlying genius of the language.' This is a metaphysical idea, but I note that, when I reviewed Billy Tait's *Collected Poems* in the *New Shetlander* ten years ago, I referred to the Shetland dialect as 'a peculiarly poetic language'. A glance at Tait's work is enough to show that the modern Shetland dialect, far from being debased, or moribund, is almost incredibly flexible. For instance, I'd go as far as to suggest that Billy's translation of Ronsard's famous sonnet 'Quand vous serez bien vieille' is at least as great a poem as Yeats's 'When you are old', which was based on the same original.

Tait's translations of Villon, still partly unpublished, are another example of his virtuosity; they have been praised to the skies by scholars of medieval French.

This is not to say that the future of the Shetland dialect, as a written and spoken language, will be plain sailing. There still lingers a feeling, faint now, but still irritating, that the dialect is a good medium for farce: that it's not something for polite company. On Radio Shetland, for instance, they read the weather forecast and some of the more frivolous news items in dialect, but reserve standard English for solemn announcements. I remember overhearing two Shetlanders discuss Rosie Gibson's splendid film on the Shetland hosiery industry, which abounded with Shetland dialect, the day after it had been broadcast. They were affronted. 'Wha does du think wid a understood yun?' one of them said. They were worried about the national audience, and presumably the scorn that national viewers would bestow on the unfashionable Shetlanders portrayed in the film.

Related to this, in my opinion, is a certain uneasiness Shetlanders still have about accepting their language as a literary language. Verse is all very well, but there is a great dearth of continuous Shetland prose. Shetlanders often find dense dialect prose difficult to read, and they seem to think that others will have even more difficulty. I can understand this fear, but I don't take it seriously. D.H. Lawrence's play *The Daughter-in-Law*, written in 1911, is entirely written in dialect, and hasn't been neglected; I heard it on the radio a year or two ago. I find it difficult to understand the dialect in *Wuthering Heights*, but it doesn't stop me from reading the book. In fact, when I come to think about it, English literature is full of dialect, of one kind or another: Elizabeth Gaskell, Tennyson, Dickens, even Hopkins. Three years ago I heard my favourite critic, Tom Paulin, deal with another critic, who had complained about dialect words in Paulin's own poetry. 'I can see it would be difficult if you thought you had to go off and consult a dictionary,' said Paulin, unrepentantly, 'but it *can't* be helped!' (Radio 3, 2 February 1992).

There is no difficulty now, as there is difficulty in some dialects, about spelling. John Graham saw to that three decades ago, in an almost single-handed revolution. His predecessor as editor of the *New Shetlander* had had an extremely flexible attitude to Shetland spelling: leave it to the author. As a result his contributors came up with some astonishing renderings of perfectly common local words. John put his foot and his blue pencil down, and as a result the *New Shetlander* is a living testimonial of how to spell Shetland dialect words. Occasionally a picturesque exception slips through, but the *New Shetlander* orthography is almost always logical and avoids confusing variants.

To conclude. I've never had a reputation for admiring Shetland shibboleths. I do, however, find much to admire in the contemporary results of Shetland's linguistic and literary history. I'm not obsessed, you may have gathered, with the death of Norn, or with the disappearance of words with Old

Norse roots. I'm concerned with the modern Shetland dialect and the poetry and prose written in it.

We must get away — and I hope that we have got away — from the idea that standard English, and standard Norn (whatever that was), are norms or essences from which the Shetland dialect diverges. As my favourite biologist, Stephen Jay Gould, puts it, 'variation is the raw material of evolutionary change. It represents the fundamental of nature, not an accident about a created norm. Variation is primary; essences are illusory.' The modern Shetland dialect is a fine, flexible variant, still full of life and potential.

Bibliography

- Anderson, R., 1894: 'Old Norse intelligence — as seen in our place names', *Shetland News*, 25 August.
- Ball, R.G., 1965: 'The Shetland garrison, 1665-1668', *Journal of the Society of Army Historical Research* 43.
- Balfour, D. (ed.), 1859: *Oppressions of the Sixteenth Century in the Islands of Orkney and Shetland*. Edinburgh.
- Barnes, M., 1984: 'Norn', *Scripta Islandica*, xxxv.
- Brand, J., 1701: *A Brief Description of Orkney, Shetland, Pightland Firth and Caithness*. Edinburgh.
- Bruce, J. (ed.), 1908: *Description of ye Island of Zetland*. Edinburgh.
- Campbell, J.L., 1953: 'The Norse language in Orkney in 1725', *Scottish Historical Review* 32.
- Clarke, A., 1837: *The Miscellaneous Works of Adam Clarke*, xii, London.
- Donaldson, G. (ed.), 1954: *The Court Book of Shetland 1602-1604*. Edinburgh.
- Gifford, T., 1976: *Historical Description of the Zetland Islands*. Sandwick.
- Goudie, G., 1904: *The Celtic and Scandinavian Antiquities of the Shetland Islands*. Edinburgh etc.
- Grønneberg, R., 1981: *Jakobsen in Shetland*. Lerwick.
- Hibbert, S., 1822: *A Description of the Shetland Islands*. Edinburgh.
- Jakobsen, J., 1928-32: *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*. London etc.
- Laurenson, A., 1860: 'Om sproget paa Shetlandsöerne': *Annaler for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*.
- Low, G., 1879: *A Tour through the Islands of Orkney and Shetland in 1774*. Kirkwall
- Mackenzie, J., 1836: *The General Grievances and Oppression of the Isles of Orkney and Shetland*. Edinburgh.
- Rendboe, L., 1984: 'How "worn out" or "corrupted" was Shetland Norn in its final stage?' NOWELE 3
- Rendboe, L., 1985a: *The Shetland Literary Tradition: an introduction*. Odense.
- Rendboe, L., 1985b: *The Shetland Literary Tradition: an anthology of modern Shetland poetry*. Odense.
- Sibbald, R., 1845: *The Description of the Isles of Orkney and Zetland*. Edinburgh.
- Smith, B., 1987: 'The tarry kirk', *Shetland Times*, 24 December.
- Smith, B., 1990: 'Shetland, Scandinavia, Scotland 1400-1700: the changing nature of contact'. In: G. Simpson (ed.), *Scotland and Scandinavia*. Edinburgh.
- Stewart, J., 1948: 'Norse remains in Shetland', *New Shetlander*, 9.
- Terry, C. S. (ed.), 1909: *De Unione Regnorum Britanniae Tractatus*. Edinburgh.
- Weber, E., 1979: *Peasants into Frenchmen*. London.
- Worthen, J., 1991: *D.H. Lawrence: the early years 1885-1912*. Cambridge.